ELL Reader

Social Studies

Social Studies

Genre	Build Background	Access Content	Extend Language
Nonfiction	• Ocean Voyages • Life at Sea • China in the 1400s	• Maps • Captions • Definitions	• Nouns for Ships and Boats

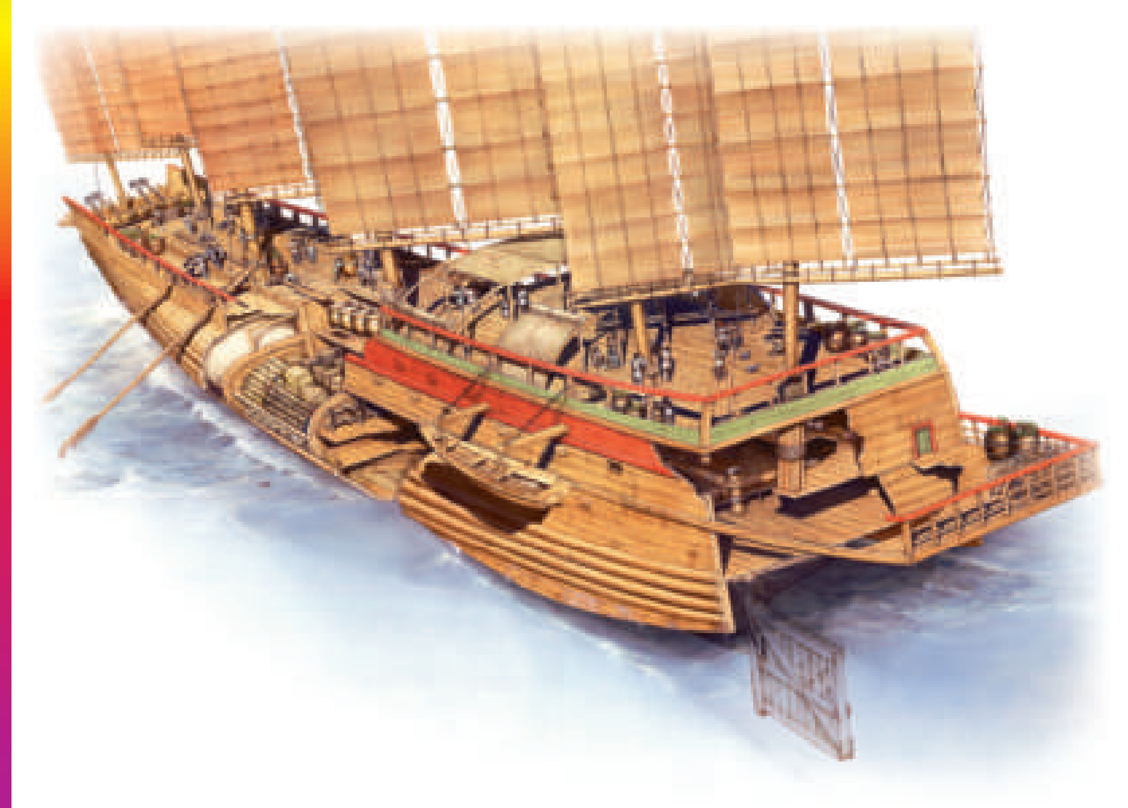
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The Treasure Fleet



by Natalie Cross



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The Treasure Fleet

In the 1400s, many of the best sailors in Europe were from Portugal. Their sailing ships, called *caravels*, were light and fast. These caravels survived the fiercest storms. In Asia, many of the best sailors were from China. Their ships and navigation were excellent.

In the early 1400s, the Ming Empire in China wanted to trade more with other countries. China had silk cloth and beautiful blue and white pottery to sell. The emperor Zhu Di decided to build great ships to travel around the Indian Ocean. He wanted to trade, but he also wanted to show the world how powerful China was.

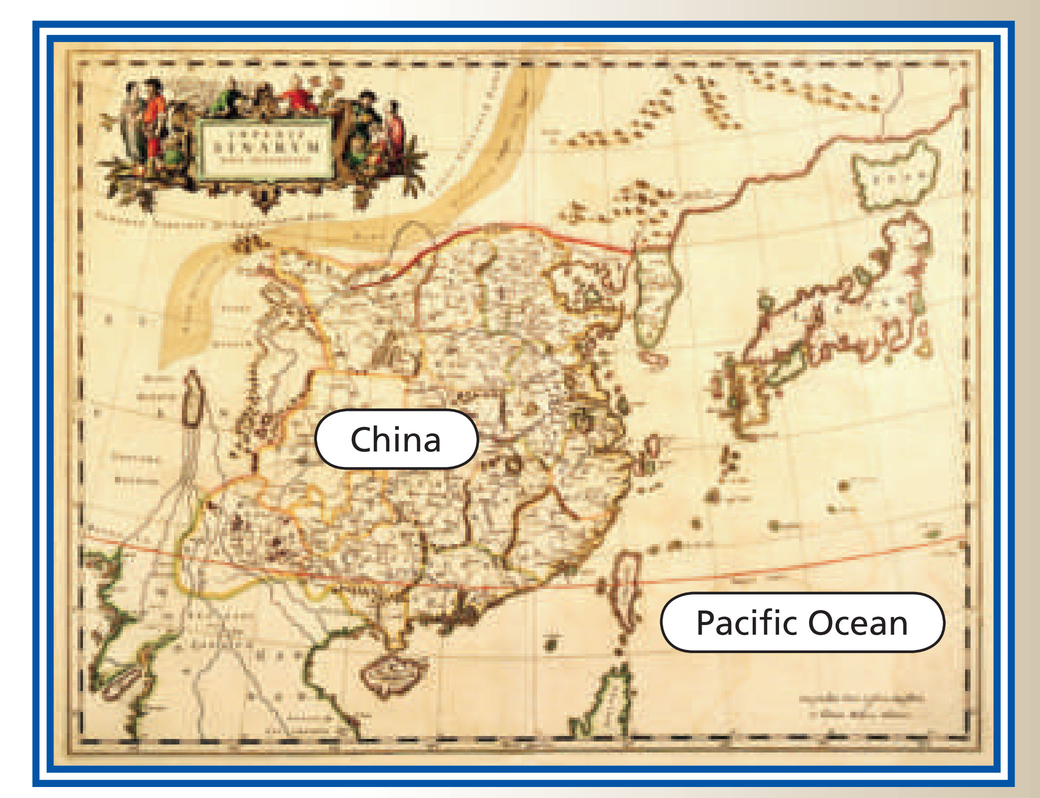


The Chinese wanted to trade their beautiful silk cloth for goods from other countries.



trade: buy and sell things

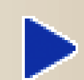
goods: things for sale



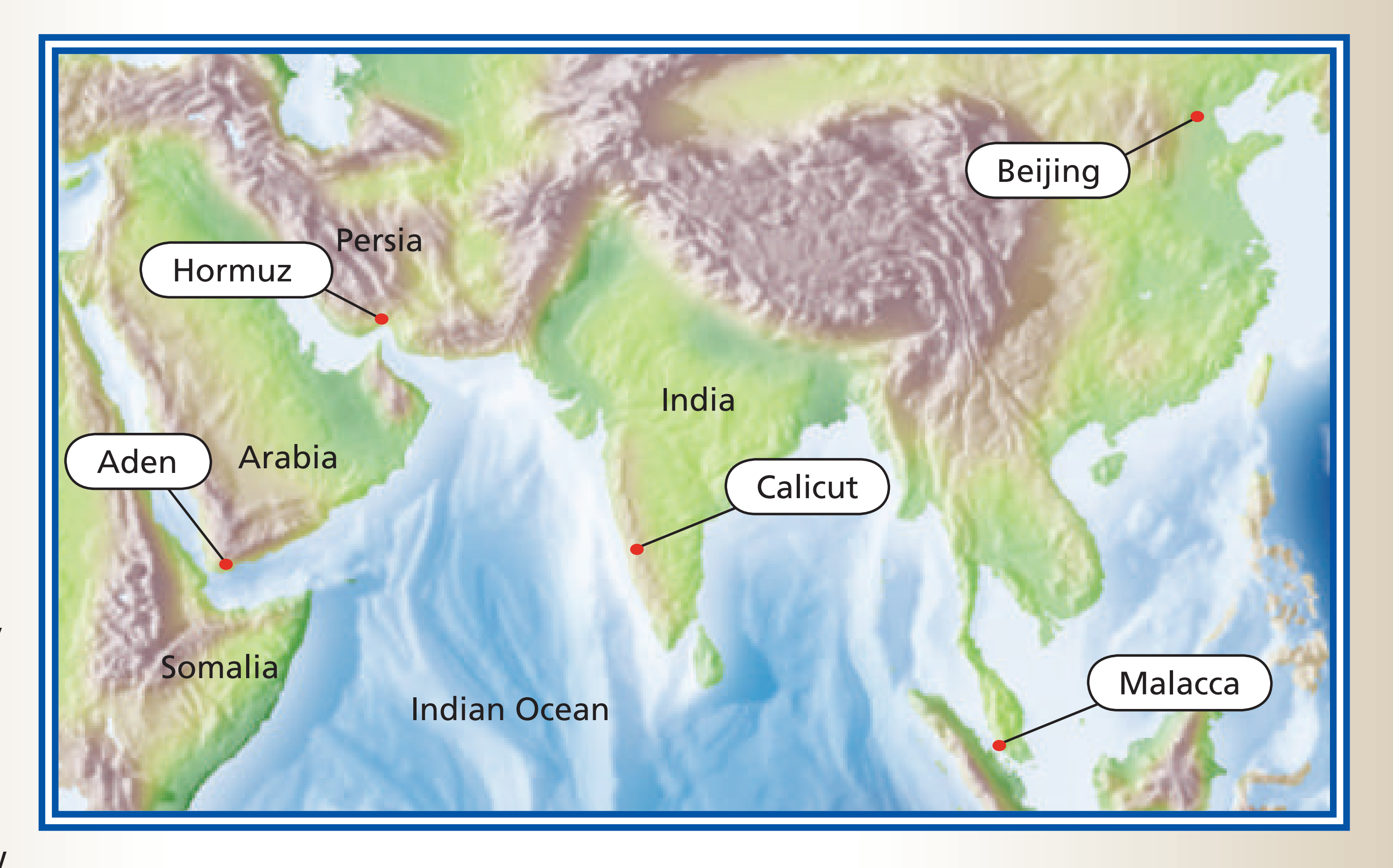
China as a mapmaker pictured it in the 1400s, when the Treasure Fleet sailed

The emperor chose his advisor Zheng He for this important job. Zheng He watched over the construction of the powerful ships. Then he took command of the newly formed Treasure Fleet. The plan was to send these ships to all of the major ports in the Indian Ocean. The Chinese would trade their goods, which were very popular. They would also make special visits to each country's king or emperor. They wanted to make sure every ruler saw their powerful ships. They wanted everyone to know it would be a bad idea to attack China.

fleet: a group of ships that sail together



The Treasure Fleet visited most of the major ports of the Indian Ocean on its first journey in 1405.



Life on a Treasure Ship

Life at sea was hard in the 1400s, but the Chinese prepared well. Several ships in the fleet were used to store grain, mostly rice. Every ship had large water cisterns. The sailors were careful not to waste water. If they ran out of water, they also knew how to get fresh drinking water from salty seawater.

The Chinese sailors ate dried, salted fish for protein, which people need. They drank green tea and had fruit for dessert. Fruit was important because it had Vitamin C, which helped to prevent scurvy, a disease that killed sailors all over the world.

The sailors sprouted soy beans to make soy milk and a kind of food called tofu. They brought large tubs of soil onto the ships and grew fresh cabbages, turnips, and bamboo shoots.

cisterns: tanks for storing liquids



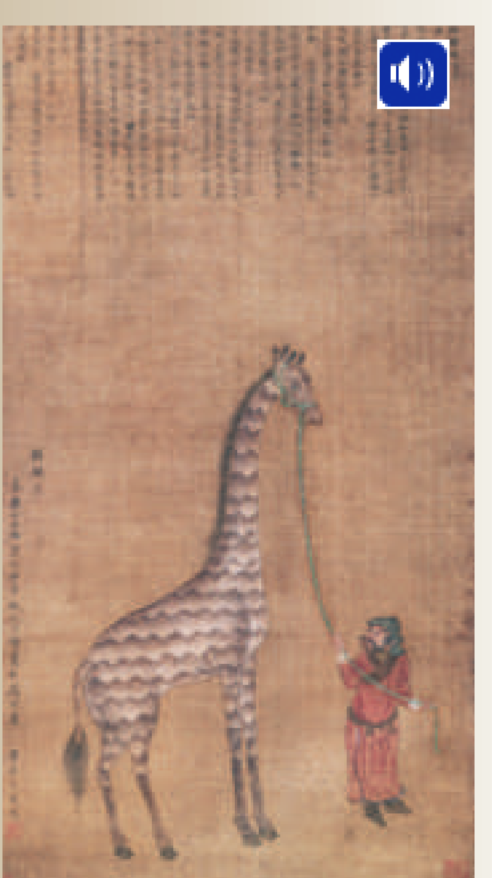
Where Did the Treasure Fleet Sail?

The first great Treasure Fleet voyage began in 1405. The fleet sailed south from Beijing with more than 300 ships. Almost 28,000 men were on board. One of their first stops was the trading port of Malacca, which is close to the modern city of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia.

From there the Treasure Fleet headed west, visiting many of the major ports of the Indian Ocean, including Calicut in India. They also visited Hormuz near Persia and Aden in Arabia. Continuing west, they reached the coast of Africa and visited the country that is now called Somalia.

This first journey took two years and was very successful. The Chinese traded their cargo of silk and their beautiful white and blue porcelain dishes and vases. They returned with spices and exotic animals. The emperor Zhu Di was especially delighted to see his first giraffe, an animal unlike any he had ever seen before.

The Treasure Fleet sailed six more times over the next thirty years. In Africa, the sailors traded their goods for ivory, pearls, gem stones, and rare woods and incense. Everywhere they went, the fleet caused great excitement.



A Chinese artist drew this picture of the giraffe Zheng He brought back from Africa and presented to emperor Zhu Di.



People in many ports loved China's blue and white porcelain vases.







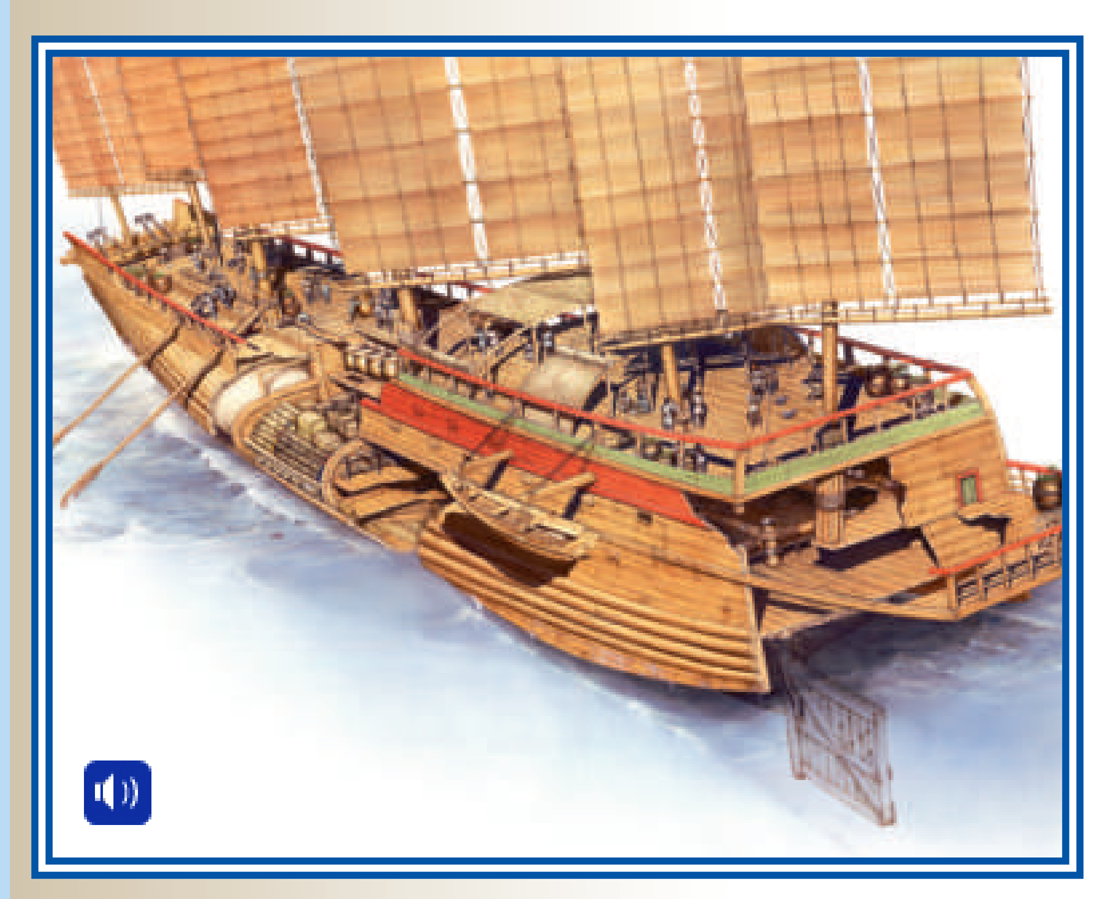
After his death, Zheng He was honored for his brave voyages.

Why Did the Chinese Stop Exploring?

The Treasure Fleet made its last voyage in 1433. Zheng He and the fleet had spread China's fame around the world and brought glory to his country. Plays and novels were written about him. Handsome statues were carved and placed in parks for all people to admire.

But soon the times would change. A new Ming emperor took power. The emperor was worried about enemies that could attack China over land, not from the sea.





One of the Treasure Fleet ships

The new emperor refused to continue exploring the world. He wanted money to build up the army, not the navy. Soon, the great ships of the Treasure Fleet were not used.

He also had his people destroy as many of the ship notes and maps as they could find. China's age of exploration was over. By the 1500s the countries of Europe—not the Chinese—sent their ships across the globe to rule the seas and conquer distant lands.

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army: military forces on land

navy: military forces on ship at sea



Talk About It

1. How did the Chinese sailors make sure that they had healthy food during their Treasure Fleet trips?
2. What do you think the author wants us to remember about the Treasure Fleet?

Write About It

3. Imagine that you were a sailor in the Treasure Fleet. On a separate sheet of paper, write a diary entry about a day aboard one of the ships.

Extend Language

There are many kinds of ships and boats, both large and small. You have read about Treasure Fleet ships from China and caravels from Portugal. You may have seen a rowboat or a submarine. Can you name other kinds of ships or boats?

Photographs
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